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ABSTRACT

The booklet presents Vermont's policy statements regarding the education of gifted and talented students. Reasons are offered for the lack of appropriate education for this populaton in Vermont, including lack of recognition of the need, and misunderstanding gifted programing as elitist. The current situation in the state is examined and local efforts briefly reviewed. Despite lack of legislation addressing the needs of gifted students, the state has begun to address gifted education through new standards. Growing concern for gifted education is cited. The booklet concludes with a listing of five policy initiatives, including support for intra-district, inter-district, and regional approaches in such areas as transportation systems, curriculum development, and training programs; support for the expansion of preschool screening; and establishment of certification regulations for teachers of gifted and talented. (CL)

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Gifted and Talented Education In Vermont

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Introduction

Gifted and talented children think and process information differently from their classroom peers. They learn earlier, more quickly, and in a little different manner from most other children.

How these differences are defined and identified by educators is a controversial issue. Some schools focus on academic ability and target programs for groups of achievers or potential achievers comprising 3-5 percent of the student population as measured by IQ and/or achievement tests. Other schools target a larger population called a talent pool, which may include up to 25% of the student population. Yet others seek creative or artistic students or those with exceptional leadership potential. These programs rely on subjective as well as objective evaluation of student behavior and performance.

Regardless of the various definitions employed by schools and education departments, gifted children do exist in the schools and, all too often, they are not nurtured nor are their special learning needs met. Instead, the myth prevails that "the cream rises to the top" or that if children are really bright, they will make it anyway. This is not true. The results of not meeting these children's special needs are costly, both to the children and to society. Consider the following:

- Nationally, 20 percent of high school dropouts are in the upper five percent of their classes;[1]
- In Vermont, 55 percent of high school dropouts are in the upper ten percent of their classes;[2]
- Students in the upper five percent of their classes comprise 63 percent of students with severe drug problems;[3]
- Two groups of gifted children, junior high school girls and high school boys, are at greater risk of attempting or committing suicide than any of their peers.[4]

Thus, at a time when America is facing its greatest competitive threat, she is squandering her most important resource—human capital. By not meeting the needs of this very special population, some of the best and brightest children in the country are condemned to isolation and despair.

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[1] National Association of Secondary School Principals. Curriculum Report Newsletter, Dec. '78.

[2] Tilley, Herbert. Johnson State College, Johnson, VT. 1979.

[3] Hart, Roy. *Bitter Grass: The Cruel Truth About Marijuana*. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. 1980.

[4] Rabkin, Brenda. *Growing Up Dead*. 1978.

There are four general reasons for the lack of education for the gifted and talented in Vermont. The first is simply lack of recognition that there is a problem. Too many people subscribe to the myths noted above. Even some of those who should know better express ignorance. A 1976 survey indicated that 56 percent of school principals believed there were no gifted and talented students in their schools.[5]

A second reason is attitudinal and has strong roots in the egalitarian tradition of America. Gifted and talented programs are viewed as elitist. Those who hold this view fail to recognize that equal educational opportunity does not mean identical educational opportunity, that we already educate students in a differentiated fashion, and that elites already exist in our schools.

In reality, elitism results when quality enriching and challenging education is "saved" for the gifted. When gifted children get to do something which all children would enjoy and benefit from doing, such as making a class newspaper, it probably is elitist and claims of elitism are justified. However, simply making a class newspaper does not constitute appropriate differentiated curricula for the gifted. A more appropriate activity for gifted elementary students might be a comparative study of how different countries around the world use the media for propaganda purposes. Students might follow-up by creating their own propaganda papers from differing viewpoints.

If schools wished to form truly elite groups, they could select less than one percent of the student population for their programs. They could build special facilities for them to learn in. They could pay teachers of these students extra money to teach them. Schools could purchase special equipment and materials for these students to use. These select students could be bused to other schools to have the opportunity to interact with their own ability peers and they could all have matching clothing to wear while they do it. The media could cover these interactions and the remaining students could accompany these special groups to encourage and support them. These elite groups – might be called basketball teams.

Third, gifted and talented programs lack a consistent, long-term source of financial support. Currently, there are no federal funds specifically designated for gifted and talented education. Local schools may elect to use some Chapter 2 money for programming but this amount of money is too minute to make an impact on gifted and talented education in Vermont. In Fiscal Year 1983, Chapter 2 monies used for gifted and talented education in Vermont totaled $112,249 or less than $23 per child based on a gifted population of five percent. This represents about one-third of one percent of the $325 million spent annually for education in Vermont. At the state level, there are no funds specifically designated for gifted and talented education. Other sources of major

[5]National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1976.

funding are highly competitive, inconsistent, and probably insufficient to meet the need indicated by Vermont public schools.

Finally, the small size and isolation of many Vermont schools and lack of staffs trained to work with gifted and talented students present important logistic impediments to the development of programs. The low population of gifted youngsters in small schools can make programming for them appear expensive and/or impractical.

Current Situation

There is no national mandate for differentiated education for the gifted in the United States. However, all but two states, Vermont and Wisconsin, have legislation addressing the needs of gifted students.[6] In Vermont, the education of gifted and talented students is the responsibility of the local school district.

Some local districts have accepted the challenge. Middlebury ID #4 has had special classes for gifted students for several years which are taught by a trained gifted specialist. Mt. Abraham Union High School has a comprehensive program directed by another professional trained to meet the demanding challenge of gifted learners. In these schools and in a handful of others around the state, ability is not allowed to atrophy or be "put on hold" until children escape the educational system at age sixteen or eighteen. They are, instead, challenged, encouraged, and motivated to learn just as their classmates are.

Several of these existing programs are the result of a national push in the late 1970s to promote education of the gifted and talented. At that time, a New England consortium was formed to coordinate student exchanges, to set up regional resource centers, to hold conferences, and to help start gifted programs. A state plan for gifted and talented education in Vermont was written in 1979 by a task force appointed by the Commissioner of Education and a number of federal grants for gifted and talented education were awarded within the state. Statewide workshops, courses, and special activities were sponsored by the State Department of Education. However, when federal funds dried up, many programs folded and leadership waned.

A Department survey (February, 1984) of Vermont schools reflects the current status of education for the gifted in Vermont.

At the K-8 level, ninety-six of 174 schools responding indicated they had some kind of programming for their gifted and talented students. Individualization in the regular classroom and pull-out programs were the most-commonly used methods. At the 9-12 level, schools indicated by more than a two-to-one margin that they offered programs for gifted students. Tracked classes were the most common techniques employed.

The majority of programs were not part of a district or union-wide program and only about one-half of the teachers working with gifted students had any special training in that area, calling into question the quality of some existing programs.

Some commendable extra-curricular activities such as Olympics of the Mind, Project Excell, and the Governor's Institutes have at-

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[6] A bill mandating gifted education was introduced to the Vermont Legislature in 1980 but was not passed.

tempted to fill some of the gaps for gifted students but such programs are limited in accessibility and still do not release the gifted child from twelve years of what could be an inappropriate educational experience.

Vermont law requires that schools provide "learning experiences adapted to a pupil's age and ability." While, at first reading, this may appear inclusionary for gifted children's special needs, the law does not apply to gifted education. Under law, learning experiences must be adapted to insure basic education, not to develop potential. The general, all-inclusionary law historically has not insured appropriate education for students with needs above or below the norm. Special education provides an example. Until legislation specific to special education was passed, the needs of those students were not consistently and universally addressed.

Nationally, efforts have been made to include gifted education under the umbrella of special education. Advocates claim that gifted students are "handicapped" by their giftedness in a regular classroom and face serious barriers to learning and education. However, successive narrow definitions of handicapped populations to be served have closed this avenue of advocacy and funding in the State of Vermont.[7]

Vermont has begun to address gifted education through the new Public School Approval Standards, which state that "the school offers challenges and enrichment for students who need it." While this is an important first step for meeting the needs of gifted students, evaluation of this standard may likely be done by people who are not familiar with this specific field of education, people who are unsure of what appropriate "challenges and enrichment" are and by people who are unsure of who gifted children really are.

The fact that gifted education is of growing concern among Vermont school personnel is evident by the growing number of schools indicating interest in beginning programs and the "challenges and enrichment" requirement in the new Public School Approval Standards. Teachers of the gifted have also recently organized as the Vermont Council for Educators of the Gifted, Creative, and Talented to promote the same. The ten-month-old organization has fifty-seven members. Another group, The Vermont Network for the Gifted, largely comprised of parents, is also active in awareness and advocacy work.

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[7] A petition seeking to include giftedness as a handicapping condition was recently rejected by the State Board of Education.

Policy Initiatives

The following initiatives reflect recommendations made at two roundtables attended by parents, teachers, school administrators, and representatives of higher education, as well as recommendations made through written comments, discussion at a special roundtable convened to review a draft of the gifted and talented paper, and discussions at two State Board of Education meetings.

1. The State Board of Education acknowledges that some students, because of outstanding abilities, require modifications in the regular curriculum to meet their educational needs, that the existing Public School Approval Standards require that challenge and enrichment be provided for those students, and that the monitoring of that standard be viable. If, after the initial phase-in period of the standards, it is found that the educational needs of gifted and talented students are not being met, more specific and prescriptive action will be taken by the State Board of Education.
2. The State Board of Education encourages and supports intra-district, inter-district, and regional cooperation in meeting the needs of gifted and talented students including transportation systems, curriculum development, training programs, and use of instructional and administrative personnel.
3. The State Board of Education supports the expansion of existing preschool screening programs to include screening for exceptional abilities as well as learning deficits.
4. The State Board of Education will seek funds from the Legislature to accomplish the following:
   a) Provide seed money for districts that want to start gifted and talented programs. ($50,000 annually beginning in FY 1987).
   b) Establish a gifted and talented summer institute for teachers, administrators, and parents similar to the Early Education Institute on an ongoing basis. ($10,000 annually beginning in FY 1987).
   c) Provide grants through the Inservice Institute to districts, unions, or regions to develop and/or implement transportation networks, staff training, curriculum development, hiring of personnel, and material acquisition. ($25,000 annually beginning in FY 1987).
5. Establish certification regulations for teachers of the gifted and talented. Initially, these rules would be non-prescriptive, i.e. they would be available but not mandatory for those working specifically with the gifted and talented.

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